What Happened to My Beautiful Day?

By Ltjg. Chris Escajeda

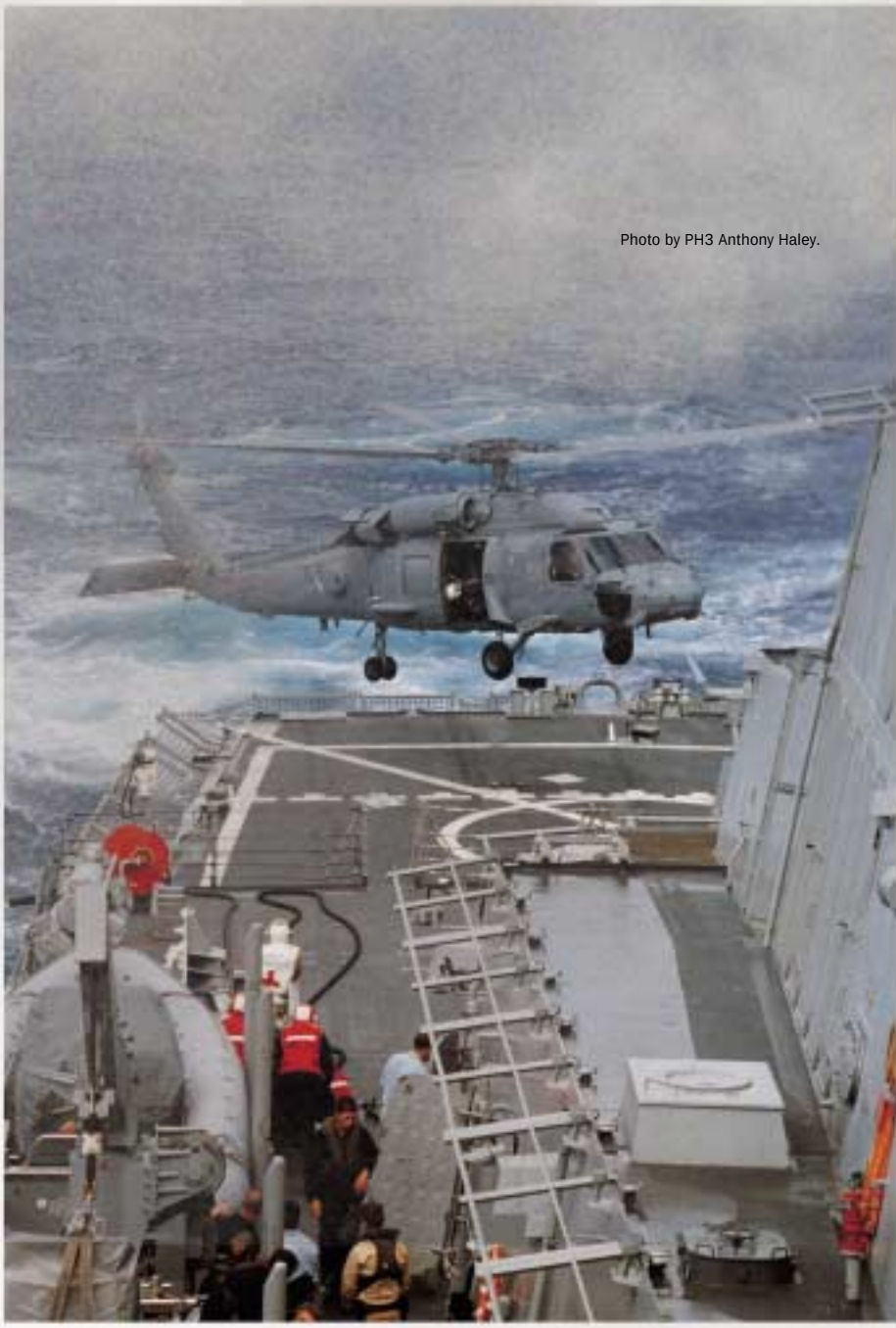

Photo by PH3 Anthony Haley.

This story isn't about landing a stricken plane on deck with one engine out, no gas, at night in a hurricane. Just the opposite—but I still did something I never thought I would do.

I was an H2P on my first deployment. We were somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, en route to Okinawa. Our SH-60 crew was scheduled for a DTE flight against our task force. This included attack runs against the group to give the boat guys some practice at querying low, slow-flying aircraft. It was a good-deal flight, compared to the SSC missions we had been doing.

The weather hadn't been cooperative this day: lots of rain and a solid layer at about 500 feet. The captain and OinC decided they didn't want to launch us until the weather improved. My HAC, AW and I decided to continue with the brief and preflight, hoping Mother Nature might give us a break. I returned to my com-

fortable spot on the wardroom couch to finish watching the afternoon movie.

A few hours later, the phone rang—it was my HAC. "Hey, have you looked outside? It's beautiful right now," he said. "Let's go."

Zipping out to the flight deck, I was amazed the weather had cleared so much. Forty-five minutes later, we were airborne and ready to start our simulated attack runs. The ASTAC came up and said that before we started the DTE portion of the flight, he wanted us to investigate some contacts 70 miles southeast of the group. We rogered up and bustered out to datum. While en route, I began to notice the weather again. Those beautiful, clear-blue skies were beginning to disappear behind a layer that was starting to build. I mentioned it to the crew, and we decided it wouldn't be a factor since we could work to the north, where it still was clear. The contacts turned out to be the usual group of fishing boats. Oh well, on to the fun stuff.

At 40 miles out, we started our first run on the ship. At 10 miles, the weather had deteriorated even more. We told the ASTAC we would be continuing north for the second run to avoid some of the goo to the south. Again, we flew to our initial point for our next run. On the transit out, we talked about the decreasing ceiling and decided to make this our last run and to get on deck before we were below minimums. As a last resort, we figured the ship could drive north where it still was clear.

After the second run, we told the ASTAC we would like to land early to avoid the deteriorating weather. He acknowledged and passed our request to the bridge. As we waited for flight quarters to be set, we orbited at 400 feet and 2 miles off the stern. Before I knew it, I no longer could see the ship. My HAC and I decided to practice a few approaches to the ship to check the visibility. Shooting the TACAN approach, we waved off at a quarter-mile. The ship barely had come into view at the MAP. As we turned downwind, paddles gave us a green deck for landing. I had been at the controls until this point, so it was my approach. Turning in at 1.2 DME, I flew the numbers to the MAP, but the ship wasn't in sight. On the climb out, I began to feel a little funny and started to get the leans.

"No sweat…" I thought, "It's not too severe. Just fly the instruments and you'll get over it." Big mistake. Halfway through the next approach, I really started to feel it. So much that I finally decided to 'fess up and pass control of the aircraft to the left seat. Again, no ship was in sight. Our best bet was to climb above the layer and to see if we could find a sucker hole to which we could vector the ship.

We popped out above the layer at 3,000 feet and continued to 5,000 feet. Looking around, we saw nothing but a solid blanket of cotton. What happened to the clear skies to the north? So much for plan B. Our crew talked it over as we slowed to max-conserve airspeed. Taking some advice from the OinC, we decided to do an emergency-low-visibility approach (ELVA) in conjunction with a smoke-light approach. I couldn't believe it. This wasn't supposed to happen. Those approaches are something you hear about maybe once or twice while in the FRS but never expect to use. But there we were, getting vectors from the ASTAC and hearing "Smoke away, now…now…now." The approach went well. We picked up the first Mk-25 at a quarter-mile and then got a visual on the ship's wake. We followed it in and were able to land safely—just in time for dinner.

So, what did I learn? Things could have been a lot worse. Despite our situation, we still had plenty of gas, it was daytime, and our aircraft was working 4.0—not to mention having a great ASTAC. Had anything been different, we might have gone swimming.

We did make some good decisions. Our crew coordination was great. I handled the comms while the HAC concentrated on flying. The AW provided great backup to the ASTAC with the radar.

Fly what you brief. If you have vertigo, 'fess up right away; don't wait for the middle of an approach. Decide early enough so your copilot has time to acclimate himself to the environment. Never take the weather for granted. It can come up faster than you think and bite you when you least expect it.

Ltjg. Escajeda flies with HSL-37.